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Book Review: Jefferson's Poplar Forest: Unearthing a Virginia Plantation edited by Barbara J. Heath and Jack Gary

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Book Reviews

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JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST: UNEARTHING A VIRGINIA PLANTATION, edited by Barbara J. Heath and Jack Gary, 2012, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 256 pages, 40 black-and-white illustrations, 8 maps, $29.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Julia King

If the list of books with "Thomas Jefferson" in the title generated by Amazon.com is any indication, 2012 was a banner year for our third president. Indeed, writing about Jefferson has become a cottage industry as historians seek out new documents and read old ones in new ways. And yet, for all of this industrious reading and re-reading, few historians and writers have yet to tap—to really tap—the material evidence of Jefferson's life beyond the impressive architecture, the gardens, and the landscape of Monticello and, to a lesser extent, Poplar Forest.

There are important exceptions, and these exceptions, all appearing in the last three or four years, indicate that archaeological evidence may represent a new frontier in Jefferson scholarship: Susan Kern's (2010) award-winning book, *The Jeffersons at Shadwell*, drew on archaeology to articulate a narrative of Jefferson's early life and how Jefferson the man was shaped by his childhood experiences. Henry Wiencek's *Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves* (abstracted in the October 2012 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine as "The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson") draws on several tours Wiencek took of Monticello's archaeology lab and grounds as seen through the eyes of archaeologists. Also in 2012, archaeologically recovered artifacts were used in an exhibit co-produced by Monticello and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History exploring the 'paradox' of slavery and liberty on the grounds at Monticello.

And now comes *Jefferson's Poplar Forest: Unearthing a Virginia Plantation*, a collection of essays edited by Barbara Heath and Jack Gary, also published in 2012. Nine essays by eight authors pull together the most current understanding of the lives of the people who built, lived at, and/or visited Poplar Forest, Jefferson's retreat house near Lynchburg, Virginia; a tenth essay by Stephen Mrozowski provides summarizing thoughts about the preceding essays. These essays provide powerful insight into the life of Jefferson and the other members of the Poplar Forest community, the kind of insight that historians would be well-advised to include in their search for something new about the third president.

Despite parts of the book, including its subtitle, underscoring Poplar Forest's significance as "a Virginia plantation," Heath and Gary recognize that Poplar Forest is not just any plantation, but the retreat home of Jefferson, and nearly all of the essays focus on Jefferson's occupation or role in the development of the Poplar Forest landscape. Timothy Trussell, for example, describes Jefferson's evident thoughtfulness in the planned landscape at Poplar Forest, his effort to secure and transport plants from Georgetown, and his likely effort to develop a view from his study worthy of an aging president. Jack Gary shows how Jefferson's "aesthetic philosophy" extended even to the ceramics Jefferson purchased in an ongoing effort to realize his vision of "universal beauty" (p. 103). Juxtapose Trussell's and Gary's findings against Heath's struggle to locate evidence of slave housing and the ephemeral signals that speak of damp, drafty, cold, temporary, dangerous, and uncomfortable structures. Even Jefferson's experiments with agricultural innovation, Eric Proebsting suggests, do not appear to have been translated into better housing for his enslaved workers. Jefferson may have been forced to make decisions that impacted the standard of labor housing in the context of his personal "staggering debt" (p. 103), but he still managed to dress his dining room table with ceramic sets suggesting his pursuit of the aesthetically beautiful.

Lori Lee's engaging essay on stone tobacco smoking pipes—and the quarter residence of at least one likely maker—suggests that tobacco pipes were being manufactured at

Poplar Forest during Jefferson's ownership, and stone pipes elsewhere in central Virginia are almost exclusively associated with Jefferson family properties. Using the pipe evidence as well as documents, Lee suggests routes of circulation among the people, free and enslaved, in this part of Virginia (although she acknowledges sample size may be an issue). Couple this with the following chapter by Jessica Bowes and Heather Trigg, who consider the archaeobotanical evidence recovered from Poplar Forest. Bowes and Trigg found evidence to suggest that, when Jefferson was not in residence, the "slaves supplemented their diet more strongly" (p. 170), meaning that the slaves appear to have enjoyed greater mobility in the acquisition of food. Food security (that is, food provided by the owner), the authors suggest, could have limited mobility, a "trade-off" perhaps limiting "self-determination" (p. 171).

Taken together, Trussell, Gary, Heath, Lee, Proebsting, Bowes, and Trigg generate a narrative that does not place Jefferson in the best light, although it may have been an unremarkable light for its time and place. Even as Jefferson was fashioning an elite landscape (made ever more elite by its purpose as a retreat), he appears, at least at Poplar Forest, indifferent to the living conditions of his laborers. His physical presence may have further restricted their mobility, which, while it may not have impacted nutrition, may have affected social interactions among enslaved people. That said, Heath's essay also notes that Jefferson "accommodated slaves' desires for kin-based living arrangements from his early period of ownership" (p. 125) at Poplar Forest even as she finds that, at Monticello, Jefferson did not hesitate to break up family groups when it served his purpose. The shift from tobacco to wheat agriculture, she argues, does not appear to be the driving force behind the size of slave dwellings and, by inference, household groupings. All in all, these essays reveal that Jefferson's relationship with his laborers was complicated. This is nothing new; what is new is how the archaeological record, coupled with ethnohistorical evidence, both deepens and expands the understanding of that relationship.

Recognizing that Poplar Forest was occupied long before and long after Jefferson had left his mark on the landscape (Jefferson owned the property from 1806 until 1823), the editors include two essays that seek a greater temporal context. Proebsting's essay takes the long view, using historical ecology to frame his discussion of the plantation. He begins with Native history, but Proebsting's concern is primarily with tobacco cultivation, the demands tobacco (and corn) place upon the soil, and planters' strategies of management through crop diversification. In a second essay, Lee is concerned with the antebellum slave community at Poplar Forest, now in the hands of a new owner unrelated to Jefferson or his descendants. Lee suggests how consumerism, a function of the material desires that ultimately drove slavery, could also be put to work challenging, resisting, and reworking conditions of enslavement as slaves themselves were important consumers.

In his concluding essay, Mrozowski observes that "it is difficult to find a concept that encompasses all of the elements that contributed to [Poplar Forest's] landscape" (p. 190), and he suggests that the concept of space "is perhaps the best way to envision what was created at Poplar Forest" (p. 190). Indeed, the book's subtitle, "Unearthing a Virginia Plantation," suggests that the authors are interested in framing their study as much more than just another tome on Jefferson. Heath's inclusion of a well-written "brief history of plantation archaeology in Virginia" suggests that the editors and authors see a landscape that is bigger than Jefferson. Jefferson was at best a part-time resident, and, if there are lessons to be had from the archaeology at Poplar Forest, it is the opportunity to explore the lifeways and life experiences of the enslaved and free people who lived at and kept Poplar Forest running. Mrozowski suggests that the "volume's greatest success is that it breathes new life into the households of people who labored at Poplar Forest" (p. 197), producing a corrective to "end historical silences" of the kind that place a focus on Jefferson while the many other residents on the plantation "remain forever nameless." After all, "as a plantation," Mrozowski points out, "Poplar Forest was not that different from many similar places in the South" (p. 191).

Although I agree with Mrozowski, I would add one thing: very few of those other similar places throughout the South have their own decades-old departments of archaeology hard at work recovering their pasts. Poplar Forest (and the other Virginia plantations associated

with the founding fathers) demand that we not only foreground those who might have otherwise remained nameless or silent, but those—like Jefferson—whose actions contributed to that silence. Whether you perceive Jefferson as an "American sphinx," as Joseph Ellis (1996) put it, or as "one of the most deeply creepy people in American history," as legal scholar Paul Finkelman does (Schuessler 2012), Heath and Gary and their authors have much to contribute to Jefferson scholarship, including his relationship with his family and laborers. The everyday, seemingly unremarkable artifacts of life as it was lived at Poplar Forest provide perhaps some of the most powerful evidence for a new kind of understanding of the third president and, to some extent, late 18th- and early 19th-century plantation life. Heath, Gary, and their authors, very capable scholars, present us with a book that truly does discover 'something new' about Jefferson by placing him in the kind of context his writings do not always do. Their book is a must-read for anyone interested in Founding Fathers scholarship, Jefferson, or Virginia plantations.

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